

The “Se cerca” Script: Conventions and Meaning in an Eighteenth-Century Aria Tradition  
(*Dissertations-In-Progress Submission*)

“Se cerca, se dice,” the climactic aria from Metastasio’s heroic opera *L’Olimpiade* (1733), was a centerpiece of galant musical culture. Adored by critics for its affective immediacy and treasured by star castrati for its union of tender lyricism with virtuosic flair, “Se cerca” graced the eighteenth-century stage hundreds of times, inspiring over seventy compositions by dozens of the century’s most celebrated composers. What is more, the aria’s many settings share a striking number of musical features, as though each sketched a common subject from a distinct artistic perspective. “Se cerca” was thus more than a popular text: it was the catalyst for an extraordinarily rich musical tradition structured by its own dialogic network of generic constraints. In contrast to the style-wide, intergeneric conventions addressed by modern-day *Formenlehre* and schema theory, “Se cerca” provides an unprecedented look at the largely-overlooked *situation-specific* pressures that animate the galant style.

Rooted in detailed analysis of the tradition’s fifty-nine surviving specimens, this dissertation tells a theoretical story about the conventions of “Se cerca, se dice:” their development, their impact on composing and listening, and their relation to broader aspects of the style. Chapter 1 introduces the “Se cerca” tradition by sketching its theatrical history, situating the aria within *L’Olimpiade’s* dramatic arc, and outlining some of its more salient intertextual features. Chapter 2 argues that the aria was associated with a specific “script”—a schema for how a “Se cerca” should go—encompassing the characteristic musical structure both of the aria itself and of the preceding recitative. Chapter 3 explores how this script emerged from style-wide conventions that nourished the tradition’s earliest products, arguing that marked features of Metastasio’s text constrained early settings in specific ways, thereby implanting a set of strongly-related features at the tradition’s core. Chapters 4 and 5 detail the structure of the “Se cerca” script, divided respectively into its expository and recapitulatory phases, and consider how it addressed shifting expectations about the representational and emotive power of music. A portrait thereby emerges of a richly-detailed set of musical behaviors shaped by the powerful theatrical and dramatic pressures of this remarkable Metastasian text.

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